

Chapter 4

Fathers on Leave Alone in Portugal: Lived Experiences and Impact of Forerunner Fathers

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4.1 Introduction

In Portugal there has been a continuing enhancement of fathers' leave entitlements over the last two decades. Policy goals have underlined the improvement of work-family balance for both parents and the well-being of the child as well as the promotion of gender equality, in particular through the increased involvement of fathers in child care. The last reform of the parental leave system, in 2009, addressed all these objectives but put a strong emphasis on fatherhood and gender equality by increasing paternity leave to 4 weeks of fully-compensated leave (taken with the mother after childbirth) and, more importantly, by introducing a 1-month 'bonus scheme' in case of gender sharing of leave (Wall and Leitão 2014).

The main aim of this chapter is to examine the consequences of the 'sharing bonus' policy measure from the perspective of fathers themselves. Drawing on a qualitative study carried out in 2011–2013, we will explore the understandings and experiences of fathers who took at least 30 days of parental leave in a 'home alone manner' implying daylong care for a few-months-old baby while the mother works. Which motivations and constraints underlie the decision to share parental leave? How do others, in the family and in the workplace, react to this decision? What are the lived experiences of leave alone for fathers, do they differ and why? To what extent does this type of leave lead to changes in fathers' perceptions and practices of parenting and gender roles?

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The chapter begins by describing the policy setting of the study and the theoretical and methodological framework. We then examine the experiences and profiles of fathers on ‘home alone’ leave. Finally, the main findings and their relevance for leave policies are discussed.

4.2 Developments in Leave Policies

Work-family policies in Portugal started out late, only after the transition to democracy in 1974. For nearly 50 years, during the right-wing dictatorship, pro-traditional policies promoted a male breadwinner model emphasizing women’s subordinate role as homemakers and men’s role as ‘head of family’ and provider. Family policies after the transition to democracy rejected previous gender cultural models and promoted state responsibilities to support full-time working men and women, leading to a gradual but steady increase in parents’ entitlements to leave and in publicly subsidized services to support dual-earner couples with children (Wall and Escobedo 2009).

In this context, a well-paid but short ‘early return to work’ leave policy model was introduced in 1976, with a job-protected, fully-compensated leave of 3 months for employed women. Over the next three decades, leave entitlements were made more generous for both mothers and fathers, with a new focus on ‘parental’ entitlements emerging in the 1980s and 90s: individual entitlement to 3 months unpaid additional parental leave (today called “complementary parental leave”) was introduced; 2 days of paternity leave, to be taken with the mother during the first month after childbirth, were introduced in 1995 and extended in 1999 to 3 weeks of fully-compensated leave for fathers; maternity leave, as from the mid-90s, could be divided between parents by mutual agreement and was extended to 4 months at 100 % or 5 months at 80 % of previous earnings.

More recently (Labour Law 2009), the term ‘Maternity Leave’ was replaced by the more gender neutral ‘Initial Parental Leave’ and three major changes came into effect. First, a ‘sharing bonus’ was introduced: an extra month of fully-compensated leave is available if the father takes 4 weeks or more of initial parental leave on his own after the first 6 weeks reserved for the mother. There are two options: 5 months at 100 % of previous earnings or 6 months at 83 %. The second change was an increase in paid ‘paternity leave’ to 4 weeks. Finally, compensation of complementary parental leave was introduced (at 25 % of previous earnings), if taken immediately after initial parental leave.

Fathers in Portugal can therefore take paternity leave, initial parental leave and complementary parental leave. With the new policy, fathers’ leave periods have become longer, and fathers’ use of initial parental leave has increased substantially. Before the 2009 reform only 0.6 % of fathers shared the leave. In 2010, one year after its introduction, 20 % of parents divided the initial parental leave, either in the form of the longer (58 %) or the shorter option (42 %).

Four factors may be seen to have encouraged the use of the bonus scheme by fathers in Portugal: first, it has a full earnings compensation; secondly, it allows parents to prolong childcare when the child is still very young (5–6 months); thirdly, it has been facilitated by the use of paternity leave (taken with the mother during the first month after childbirth), which increased from 17 % in 2000 to 82 % in 2014. Lastly, compared to men who began to take up leave in the mid-90s, this generation of fathers grew up in a society where the meanings associated with fatherhood were shifting dramatically (Wall et al. 2007). Other factors, however, have been introducing constraints, in particular those related to the impact of the economic crisis. Job instability and unemployment, both for men and women, rose dramatically over the last few years, making it more difficult for employees to access entitlements and to assert their rights.

4.3 Past Research on Fathers and Men's Roles: Main Approaches and Findings

There has been a considerable amount of research on men's roles in families and gender equality, mainly focusing on the need to understand how policy and cultural transformations have paved the way for the emergence of new models of masculinity and fatherhood underpinned by a renewed vision of the gender contract. Quantitative findings drawing on survey data reveal new attitudes and practices, with men's participation in unpaid work changing steadily, but still lagging behind levels of participation in most EU countries, in particular in household tasks. This has challenged research to seek to understand the changes from the perspective of men themselves: how are men negotiating old and new masculinities? And how are policy changes imprinting the way fathers and mothers perceive their household and care responsibilities and their entitlements to leave and work-family balance?

For the research issues raised in this chapter, three sets of results are important. A first set of findings concerns the changing cultural models of fatherhood in Portuguese society. There is a generalized consensus around the ideal of a caring and involved father (Torres 2004; Wall et al. 2007). Most men vehemently reject the old ideal of a distant and authoritarian father, criticize the former generations of fathers, and value the norm of the involved father who participates in the daily responsibilities of parental care, education and emotional involvement. Fatherhood also emerges as a key dimension in the building of new forms of masculinity: to a great extent, in Portuguese society, the reconfiguring of the father figure has been a powerful driving force in challenging traditional masculinities (Aboim and Marinho 2006; Aboim 2010).

Moving beyond this general trend, research also shows a diversity of fatherhood models (Wall et al. 2010). “Provider” fathers still identify with female domesticity and traditional masculinity involving the father's educational and playing role rather than caregiving, while “Helper” fathers see themselves as secondary, less competent,

caregivers who help mothers in the parental routines, relying on their guidance and mediation in parental responsibilities. “Companionship” fathers emphasize the importance of togetherness in conjugal life, seeing themselves as involved fathers who “share”, though not necessarily on an equal basis, all parenting tasks. “Career-oriented” and “egalitarian” fathers underscore the importance of gender equality and symmetry in men and women’s roles in both private and public spheres, but their work-family strategies develop along different lines: the first give priority to their professional careers, thereby seeking to be involved in parenting tasks through “quality time” with children, whereas “egalitarian” fathers tend to build up their involvement on a fifty-fifty basis, making a point of being autonomous and competent in all parenting and household tasks; contrary to expectations, this profile of fatherhood was found in different social classes, not only in highly qualified couples.

A second important set of findings concerns men’s work-family balance. Several studies have shown that men also feel that work life is acutely affecting their role as fathers and have difficulty in reconciling family and work, in particular when there are young children. In fact, men’s work-family stress, not only women’s, is particularly high in Portuguese society (Torres 2004; Guerreiro and Carvalho 2007). The key factor in men’s stress is long working hours and lack of time to be with the family and the children, making it difficult for men who feel an obligation and a need to spend more time at home to find their place in parenting routines (Wall et al. 2010). Men in manual or low paid occupations also mention shift work and the need to put in extra hours to provide a better life for their children; highly qualified men underscore the ideal of a totally career-invested and time-flexible male worker, thus finding it difficult, in particular in the private sector, to ask for more family-friendly schedules and leaves. Overall, the findings underline that employers and families still have strong expectations, despite the predominant dual-earner model, that men in families will assume the role of primary provider and secondary caregiver, also meaning that they will be available for work and long hours, less likely to take leave and more invested in their careers.

Studies adopting a comparative social policy approach and seeking to tap fathers’ and mothers’ expectations of leave entitlements represent a third set of results. A pioneer survey carried out in the late 90s revealed that a vast majority (82 %) of men approve the extension of paternity leave (1 week at the time), without loss of earnings, from 1 to 2 (34 %) or 4 (39 %) weeks; but only a minority (14 %) indicated a leave period for fathers similar to the mothers (4 months) (Perista and Lopes 1999). On the other hand, most of the interviewed men (70 %) expected negative reactions from employers to increased leave entitlements for fathers. Recent research has also shown that the sharing of leave by fathers is related to average or high educational levels and public sector employment, and that acceptance on the part of employers increases when there are other cases of fathers on leave (Ferreira and Lopes 2004). A qualitative study on motherhood and fatherhood penalty highlighted the perceived importance of full earnings compensation by both male and female interviewees as well as a leave period that should last from between 6–12 months after the birth of the child (Ferreira 2009). Analysis of the meanings of leave use revealed

that most fathers think of taking a fairly short leave with the aim of supporting the mother as the main caregiver; fewer discourses underlined the importance of sharing leave equally with the mother.

4.4 Theoretical Background

The study which informs this article is rooted in principles of symbolic interactionism and draws on a rich tradition of qualitative family research that uses them. It is also influenced by theory on changing masculinities and fatherhood, as well as the social policy literature on leave policies and the impact of leave use. Combining the three theoretical strands, our analytical framework brings together a specific set of concepts and research issues.

Drawing on family research, particular emphasis is placed on fathers' accounts of their own meanings and actions, as well as how they interpret and negotiate the latter in light of other actors' expectations (Finch and Mason 1993; Morgan 2011). Two major contributions from men and masculinities scholarship stand out. The overarching concept of hegemonic masculinity highlights complicity with patriarchy and traditional conceptions of fathers as authority figures, educators and breadwinners (Connell 1995; Hobson 2002). But the literature also emphasizes the plurality of masculinities across and within settings, thereby recognizing a more complex process of change in the new understandings of masculinity and fatherhood.

Finally, one of the major contributions of research on parental leave has been to assess the connections between parental leave and gender equality. A first major strand of research has focused on gender equality incentives and the factors which facilitate or hinder father's take-up (Bygren and Duvander 2006; Chronholm 2002; Duvander and Johansson 2012; Haas et al. 2002; Haas and Rostgaard 2011; Lammi-Taskula 2008; Pajumets 2010). Cultural, workplace, conjugal, and social variables have been shown to influence fathers' use of leave. Public policy also plays a role, with leave schemes offering individual, non-transferable and well-compensated entitlements for fathers reported as important incentives for the gender sharing of leave (O'Brien et al. 2007; Ray et al. 2010; Rostgaard 2002).

A second major strand of research has focused on fathers' experiences of leave and the impact of leave on fathers' participation in childcare and relationships with children. Nordic research carried out in the 90s suggests that fathers who were taking the 'daddy month' on a 'home alone' basis became more aware of infant life and 'slow time' than those who took parental leave with their partner (Brandth & Kvande 1998, 2001). Men on leave also valued the strengthening of father-child bonds (Haas 1992; Huttenen 1996). Slow time is described as a daily life rhythm related to caregiving which is perceived as less stressful than daily life at work. Initial findings also pointed to confident, highly educated fathers who shape their own form of carework: rather than closeness to the child, 'masculine care' emerged as committed to 'doing' things with the child and 'teaching' the child independence; also, most of

the men interviewed did not do much housework as they perceived caring for the child as the main reason for taking leave.

According to this literature then, fathers' caring activities seem to be linked to a hegemonic form of masculinity, drawing on the importance of men's role in educating and connecting the child to the outside world. Moreover, although research was expecting to find transgressive gender relations, in line with the major hypotheses on changing masculinities, 'degendering' of unpaid work did not emerge as a major trend (Ekberg et al. 2005; Deven 2005). In contrast, however, recent qualitative research on Swedish fathers (Almqvist 2008) and stay-at-home fathers who opted out of the labour market to care for a child points to some engagement of men in innovative forms of masculinity (Doucet and Merla 2007; McKay and Doucet 2010). Findings unveil important changes in fathers, such as a new child-orientated masculinity and the valuing of unpaid work. Positive effects on fathers' involvement and autonomy in childcare, in particular when more days of leave are used, has also been highlighted by quantitative data (e.g. Haas and Hwang 2008; Seward et al. 2006; Sundstrom and Duvander 2002).

The key aims of our research are therefore to explore the lived experiences of fathers on leave alone and to see if they confirm or challenge more conventional understandings of gender role models and fathering. To what extent do the social processes and consequences of the experience of leave alone imply little change in these understandings, largely confirming previous findings? To what extent do they lead to some disruption in fathers' gender identities and their perceptions of fatherhood and motherhood? Given the 'familialistic' background of the Portuguese welfare state and the relatively high gender imbalance in unpaid work, particular attention will be given to the idea of 'masculine care' identified in previous studies.

4.5 Methods and Sample

In-depth interviews were carried out with twenty fathers who had taken leave alone. In line with the topics used by most researchers in this book (see Chap. 1), the interview instrument included eight core questions acting as prompts for fathers' narratives: Could you please describe the leave you took after your child was born? Why did you decide to take leave in this way? How did people around you react to your decision (workplace, family, friends)? What was it like to be a dad on leave, can you recall the first days alone and the weeks that followed? Do you think taking up leave had any consequences on your life (career, family and conjugal bonds, work-family balance, opinions)? How was going back to work? What does it mean to be a father and a man? What is your opinion of the current leave scheme?

A non-probability purposive sampling procedure was used to ensure participants were fathers who had taken leave alone for thirty or more days. Contacts were made through word of mouth (snowballing) and personal relationships. Formal contacts with firms in the private sector were made in order to bring in diversity of sectors of employment. In order to achieve variation in the lived experiences of fathers, the

study aimed at a sample size of 12–20 interviews (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). The interviews lasted between one and a half and 3 hours and responses were taped and fully transcribed. Only pseudonyms identify the respondents in order to maintain confidentiality.

The sample of twenty fathers who participated in the exploratory study were living with their partner and children mainly in the city of Lisbon or in the inland town of Covilhã (Table 4.1). All couples were full-time dual-earner couples, in line with the predominant trend in Portuguese families with children, and most had one or two children (two had three children). Father's income was mostly higher than the median average reported for the country but there was some variety, with two men well below average, five close to it and thirteen above. The fathers were between age 28 and 54 and had low, average or high levels of education. All were employed full-time either in the private (eight) or public or state corporate sector (twelve), with the following professions: policeman, aircraft maintenance engineer, chief accountant, product manager, sports manager, television journalist, hairdresser, architect, management consultant, designer, computer engineer, nurse, driver, researcher, internet project manager, economist, software architect, radio professional, geographer, university professor.

The majority of fathers (16) had taken 2 months of leave: 1 month with the mother after the birth of the child, which is described as leave taken to support the mother and also, as one father put it, "leave to protect life"; and 1 month at the end of the mother's leave, when the baby was 5 or 6 months old. Only 4 fathers had taken more than 1 month of leave in a home alone manner and only one of these took exactly the same number of months (4.5) as the mother, fulfilling an objective of a fifty-fifty division of parental leave.

Interviews were coded and analysed by the researcher in charge and two researchers, using the grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin 1998) based on a step by step inductive analysis which respects both manifest and latent contents. Three procedures which address the issues of coding and validation may be described. Interviews were first read vertically, in order to extract a summary of each father's narrative, and then horizontally, in order to derive the main emerging themes. The first procedure involved reducing the interview text to a two-page summary of each father's leave story and background; a few key experiences were extracted from each case, in order to annotate their variety and to sensitize researchers to what they mean for fathers. The second procedure involved defining the main themes for transversal analysis. Many common themes emerged from the data, some prompted directly by the interview questions (e.g. negotiation of leave; daily practices and activities), others emerging from the fathers' narratives and in connection with our theoretical research questions (e.g. masculine or feminine division of care; personal consequences of leave such as learning and bonding; understandings of gender roles). A preliminary thematic coding agenda was applied by the researchers in order to ensure inter-observer reliability. Once agreed on, the themes were used in all 20 interviews, to enable transversal scrutiny and to move on to the third procedure – the extraction of meaningful interpretations and concepts (e.g. 'supported' versus 'innovative' profiles of fathers).

Table 4.1 Interviewed Fathers, by age, education, profession, wife's profession, duration of leave alone – Portugal

Name	Age	Level of education	Profession (Sector)	Wife's profession	Leave alone in mths, child, (profile)
1 Diogo	30	secondary	Policeman (public sector)	Administrative Department Manager	1 month 1st child (innovation and deconstruction)
2 Paulo	39	higher	Aircraft Maintenance Engineer (public sector)	Civil Engineer	1 month, 2nd child) (supported)
3 Joaquim	39	higher	Chief Accountant (public sector)	Secretary	1 month, 3rd child (innovation and independence)
4 Manuel	34	higher	Internet Maintenance Manager (private sector)	Journalist	1 month, 1st child (innovation and deconstruction)
5 Francisco	33	higher	Sports manager (private non profit sector)	Journalist	1 month, 1st child (innovation and independence)
6 Raúl	37	higher	Tv Journalist (public sector)	Journalist	1 month (2nd child) (innovation and independence)
7 Leonardo	32	secondary	Hairdresser (private sector)	Hairdresser	1 month (2nd child) (innovation and independence)
8 David	35	higher	Architect (public sector)	Lawyer	2 months, 1st child (supported)
9 Rafael	28	Higher	Management Consultant (private sector)	Biologist	1 month, 1st child (innovation and independence)
10 Frederico	35	higher	Designer (private sector)	Researcher	2 months, 1st child (innovation and deconstruction)
11 Roberto	54	higher	Computer Engineer (public sector)	Judge	1 month, 3rd child (fundamental break)
12 Samuel	29	higher	Nurse (public sector)	Sales woman	1 month, 1st child (innovation and deconstruction)
13 José	31	Compulsory (9 years)	Driver (private sector)	Waitress	1 month, 2nd child (supported)
14 Júlio	54	higher	Researcher (public sector)	Researcher	1 month, 1st and 2nd child (innovation and independence)
15 Alfredo	39	higher	Internet Project Manager (private sector)	Internet project manager	4 months, 1st child (innovation and deconstruction)
16 Ricardo	43	higher	Economist (public sector)	Bank Department Manager	1 month, 1st child (fundamental break)
17 Tiago	35	higher	Software Architect (private sector)	Primary Teacher	2 months, 1st child (supported)
18 Emílio	38	higher	Radio Professional (public sector)	Social Worker	1 month, 1st child (supported)
19 Marcelino	44	higher	Geographer (public sector)	Lawyer	1 month,, 1st child (fundamental break)
20 Duarte	33	higher	University Teacher (public sector)	Secondary School Teacher	1 month, 1st child (innovation and independence)

4.6 The Lived Experiences of Fathers: Six Key Social Processes

Throughout the interviews, fathers were asked about their experience of taking leave and being at home alone. Daily life, decisions on the use of leave, the experience of time and bonding, strategies for dealing with the care and demands of a baby, other domains of life such as housework or leisure, opinions on the role of fathering and mothering, were all abundantly discussed. From fathers' descriptions of taking leave alone to care for a baby, six social processes linked to this life experience emerged. All the fathers talk about these overarching processes, enabling us to identify fundamental aspects of the experience.

4.6.1 *Negotiating*

The first process involves participants' experiences of *negotiating* leave, mainly with their partner and employers. The length of leave (5 or 6 months) and the amount of time taken by each parent (one or more months, and when) always require a complex decision-making process in which the couple has to weigh up different factors: the impact of leave on each partner's career, employers' openness to fathers' leave-taking, the interests of the child (e.g. age for starting daycare) and those of parents (e.g. professional self-fulfillment; parental and gender equality values; reprisals in the workplace). All fathers had been informed of the new 'sharing bonus' contained in the 2009 law, but only some knew about the individual entitlement to the complementary parental leave compensated at 25 % of previous earnings. However, they all discussed the use of sharing bonus with their partner and informed the employer as soon as possible.

Although these forerunner fathers began by 'telling' their employer, as a mother would inform that she was pregnant and going on leave, they also describe having to enter into a process of negotiation, since employers did not readily accept fathers' leave use as a natural right beyond the 2–4 weeks of paternity leave. As one father put it, contrary to what happens regarding the 'natural' inevitability of leave use by the mother, in the case of a man who is going to use parental leave the first reaction is to consider this as a choice or an option, which is often frowned upon by the employer.

I think you have to put your foot down. I think that it's because you're a man that they say: 'this is not necessary, you're doing this because you want to, you don't really need to do this'. That's their idea of things, "look, man, you don't need to do this, but if you really think you need to... well, it's difficult to do without you here, but it's your choice". Whereas the mother, everyone accepts that the mother goes on leave, that's how it is, but a man there is the question of: 'But what do you think you're up to? There is work to do (...) you don't have to go on leave, so if you don't have to, if you have an alternative, if a person only does this because he wants to, you are doing this and you are harming the company. So, pal, see if you can help us out here and don't do this. (Alfredo, 39, computer engineer, 1 child)

In a context of negotiation, fathers tend to ‘offer something in exchange’, by committing themselves to being available in case of ‘need’. Some factors may play in favour of the employee, such as his exceptional skills and previous commitment to the company as well as working in the public sector, having colleagues who have taken leave or having a long-term contract. Fathers employed in the private sector had more adverse reactions in the workplace than those in the public and state corporate sectors and were more often the forerunners of leave use. After noting that in his family fathers’ new entitlements were received as important and natural, Manuel (aged 34, internet maintenance manager, private company, the first to ask for this type of leave in the workplace, wife a journalist), described his experience of reprisals in the workplace:

I really wanted to be a father, not only to have a son but to care for him (...) and I didn’t understand why fathers did not take leave as mothers do, why father could not stay at home and be accepted if he shared the leave. And T. was of the same opinion (...). So when the law came out, just before the baby was born, I went to social security straight away. T. and I still thought about whether she would take five and I one, or she would take four and I two, but I couldn’t take two months with my job. Even one was bad enough. Well, it was bad, but it could be worse. I can’t compare the work I do with working in a factory, where punishment and reprisals are much more noticeable. But I think there are ways of doing these things. There’s no longer any physical whipping, but there are still psychological blows. That’s more like what I went through, that psychological game. At the time, as soon as I knew, I told them – because you have to give as much notice as possible with these things – that I intended to take a month’s leave and that it would be in July. The first question they asked me was why I wanted to take a whole month, wasn’t it enough to take just the days of paternity leave...

Reprisals eventually led Manuel to look for another job and he moved to another firm. Nevertheless, some fathers in the private sector were able to assert their rights more easily and without reprisals which, they say, would have been unacceptable given their position and commitment to the company. When Alfredo (see above) informed management that he would be taking leave for 4 months (1 month parental leave and 3 of complementary parental leave), they complained that it would be very inconvenient because it was impossible to replace him. Alfredo, however, says he claimed his entitlement to leave as a “point of fact” and a fundamental right; nevertheless, he also felt a need to compromise, and therefore accepted to be on call to solve urgent work problems during the last 3 months of leave; he even bought some special ear phones to be able to work and have the baby on his lap at the same time.

I’m in a position where I am really needed because I deal with many people in the company, I distribute the game (...), for better or for worse a lot of things depend on me. But I would not tolerate any obstacles because I have always been loyal, dedicated and professional here in the company, I was always very responsible so I wouldn’t accept no for an answer. (...) I knew the law was on my side and I hoped and confirmed that people would react with good sense. Afterwards I had to work out the logistics of things, I had to... I worked while I was at home on leave, I wasn’t able to disconnect completely from work.

In contrast, Roberto, a computer engineer working in a bank in the corporate public sector (aged 54, public sector, married to a judge, 3 children) did not have to

take workplace constraints into account; this allowed negotiation of leave to focus more on the interests of the mother and the child.

We were updated on the changes in legislation, so we discussed what to do. We preferred that she, my wife, took the maximum she could take and then only after that... I came on the scene. Well, because she was breastfeeding and so this was an advantage. I think we sort of assumed it would be so, our approach was quite traditional from that point of view. And then, of course, we thought it was important to put off the moment when the baby went to the crèche... Her sisters at four months were so small on the first day at the crèche. And then there was another aspect to the decision: my wife's job. It was always very difficult for her to stay away from the courts for long, the work piles up and you can't lose track... So we didn't want her to... We had to find the balance between caring for the baby at home for a bit longer without penalizing our working lives too much.

Other workplace constraints on the mother's side, in particular when women occupy precarious or unskilled jobs which they feel may be endangered if the employer has to replace them, also leads couples to consider the sharing of leave as more balanced. José (aged 31, driver, 2 children) says his employer was not very pleased:

My wife works in a small restaurant so the boss cannot have many employees, and then things are not looking good at all, and her boss said outright it would be difficult if she took four months, so we talked it over and, you know, we thought it was best if I took care of the kid as well for a couple of months so she needn't miss so much time at work. Well, my boss wasn't all that pleased either! But too bad, we divided it between us. We took advantage of this modern stuff...

Close relatives such as parents, siblings and parents-in-law, both men and women, were strongly supportive of fathers taking leave. In fact, all the fathers reported positive attitudes from family members, while reactions from friends and work colleagues were varied. Some fathers recalled joking and strangeness from close friends and colleagues, in particular in workplaces where fathers had never taken leave before. Often, however, this led other men to think about using leave and later inquiring about the "best way to go about it".

In summary, this diversity of reactions, both positive and negative, and the need to negotiate leave at home and in the workplace, show that fathers' use of the leave bonus during this early stage of policy implementation is far from being taken for granted. In contrast to countries where the 'daddy month' has been in place for many years, these fathers are often regarded as 'exceptions' by their employers and perceive themselves as 'pioneers' who have to assert their rights and go against predominant perceptions of the fully-invested male worker who does not 'need' to use leave to care for young children. The main factors that constrain or incentivize the use of leave on a 'home alone' basis are, nevertheless, varied. Those working in the private sector usually had to face negative reactions in the workplace. Being in a position of management or responsibility was another highly constraining factor. On the other hand, three main variables emerge as factors that incentivate father's use of the new leave rights: the mother's full-time participation in the labour market and need/motivation to go back to her job (also linked to the strong acceptance, in Portuguese society, of the full-time dual earner model); the wish to keep the child at home for a slightly longer period; and a strong motivation, both on the part of the father and the mother, to share caregiving and hands-on parental involvement as from the birth of the child.

4.6.2 *Doing*

The second process relates to what fathers actually do while on leave, that is, their multiple *activities*, including care of a baby and other household tasks, work time or leisure time. Fathers describe what some scholars call a 'shift in time experience' (Hallman et al. 2007). They spoke of experiencing both a strong pressure from the constant and tiring demands of daylong caring for a baby and a difficult juggling, or loss, of opportunities to do other things, including resting, leisure, working or household tasks. Rather than the experience of slow time then, it was the experience of fast time and exhaustion, related to the caregiver's job, and leaving little time to rest or do other things for very long, that emerged from most of the interviews.

It was a very demanding month ... I was with him. He'd wake up, I'd give him his bottle, then he would go back to sleep a bit during the morning, then I would play with him. Then I'd make lunch, tidy up, spend part of the afternoon with him, interacting with him, playing. Then, well, he would sleep a bit more, but almost every time I thought I'd take a bit of a rest after tidying up and having done all that stuff, he would wake up. It was an almost never-ending cycle, with no rest in between, it's really very tiring looking after a baby all day. (Rafael, 28, management consultant, 1 child)

It takes up all your time. You only manage to do something else when the baby is asleep, practically ... The rest of the time, your attention is concentrated on the baby, so you can't do anything else. Patricia had already said to me: 'look, free time is little or nothing!', and in fact I confirmed this, there was very little time, for example, to tidy the house a bit, or do the dishes, make the bed, those sort of things, or take a look at something on the computer that was really important at the time. So, that idea of *relaxing*, sitting calmly on the sofa reading a book or watching TV, no. No, no, not at all. Sometimes it was even complicated to ..., sometimes I only took a bath in the afternoon for example (Ricardo, 43, economist, 1 child)

Apart from caring for the baby, fathers also try to build housework, work or leisure into their daily activities. The kinds of activity vary, as they are shaped by the father's agency and efforts in trying to get other things done at the same time, by pressure to do some work while on leave and also by the availability of a third person to help out. Five fathers in positions of responsibility (chief accountant, computer engineer, internet project manager) or involved in work with difficult deadlines (researcher, university teacher) occasionally went into work with the baby for an afternoon to sort out an urgent problem or did some work from home, usually in the evenings when their partner returned or at night when the child was asleep. Some fathers made an effort to get all the housework and shopping done, but others only cared for the baby and did not worry at all about housework, relying on their partner, a daily or a family member for help. Leisure activities such as surfing the net or reading are usually mentioned as being difficult to achieve, due to the many interruptions. The five fathers who experienced time as less demanding and felt they had some moments of free time were also those who had daily support in care and household tasks: Paulo, an engineer, had his mother's support to help with childcare every afternoon and his wife did all the housework; José had daily support from his mother; David had a domestic employee who also helped care for the baby; Tiago

did no housework as his partner, a primary school teacher, came home at 2 pm and did everything; while Emílio did not have anyone to help care during the day but the baby took long naps, giving him a sense of slow time and an even a feeling of ‘saturation’ from being at home (his partner also did all the housework).

4.6.3 *Learning*

The *learning* process is also a fundamental aspect of the experience mentioned by all the fathers. Having been on paternity leave for 2–4 weeks, all the interviewees had acquired at least some basic skills, such as changing nappies, by the time they stayed alone. Most fathers therefore describe the acquisition of skills as a process which goes beyond the role of a care ‘helper’. This includes learning how to be an “independent” or self-sufficient carer by taking on responsibility alone, learning the ins and outs of emotional care rather than just instrumental care such as changing nappies and feeding, and “testing oneself” as a solo carer.

That’s when we truly become parents, isn’t it? When we have such a close tie to them that we know just by the kind of crying, or by his manner, what he wants ... that kind of awareness is very important, I think it shows how close you are, and that’s what it really means to be a father. (Rafael, 28, management consultant, 1 child)

To all effects this was my first complete experience of being a father... during that time you understand that... there you have the real proof that your life has changed, right? And that everything will be different, your priorities change completely, your priorities, your timetable, everything. So I, during that month, I had the concrete proof that the most important thing... was that baby, it was Pedro, and also the idea of the responsibility that this implies is something which, I think, really changes you as a person, especially someone who has decided to use the shared parental leave, it was a big experience (Ricardo, 43, economist, 1 child)

The process of becoming autonomous and confident as a solo carer seems to be related to the absence of third parties, partner or other persons, who provide support and act as mediators during the day. In fact, the few fathers who were supported by their partner (coming home early) and/or another family member or domestic helper, tend to perceive the use of the leave bonus as reinforcing the basic skills acquired during paternity leave with the mother rather than providing a new and fundamental learning experience as a solo carer. However, this process may also lead to a lived experience of fatherhood which is different. José, for example, helped out very little when he was on paternity leave for 10 days after the birth of the child, but when he stayed home for a month, in spite of his mother’s support, it was then he learnt how to give the bottle and change nappies as a regular routine.

I was very awkward at first, but then I got used to it (..) and now I often think: I am a very different father this time, I’ve learnt and I’m not ashamed of doing things that a mother does and this is how it should be, because after all she also works (José, 31, driver, 2 children)

4.6.4 *Bonding*

Fathers also tell us about the social process of *bonding*. Not surprisingly, as emphasized by previous research, all the fathers consider that being on leave alone strengthens father-child bonds, since time together promotes closeness, mutual understanding, affection, sharing and involvement. However, they also describe the strengthening of other bonds, in particular of conjugal bonds, and of intergenerational bonds, usually due to the strong interest and involvement of the father's parents in their son's experience.

During that time I spent alone with my daughter, she developed a very strong bond with me, got very close to me. Actually she got so close to me that when she woke up at night she only wanted me, she only quietened down with me. We are very good friends, we two ... (Leonardo, 32, hairdresser, 2 children)

There's no-one else there, and that creates a stronger bond ... I don't know, when people say there's a stronger tie between mother and baby, I think that tie between mother and baby is transferred to the father, at least that's what I felt. (Joaquim, 39, accountant, 3 children)

I always used to do a lot at home, but when I stayed by myself, that's when I understood the important little things that happen in day-to-day life, and I think that has helped me to appreciate the other person's perspective as well (...) because I did all those things I think my wife and I got to know each other better, and I think it actually helped our relationship quite a bit. (Manuel, 34, internet manager, 1 child)

4.6.5 *Undoing Gender*

Lastly, in different ways and with different meanings, fathers mention a process of *undoing or contesting gender* roles. For some this is merely a question of diverging slightly from routine gender practices in which certain care tasks and responsibilities were carried out or overseen by their partner. Rather than contesting gender, the situation is seen as a temporary undoing of gender which is beneficial for the mother's participation in the labour market and/or for the child's present and future well-being (staying at home for an extra month; having a father who has basic parenting skills). In other cases the move away from pre-conceived male and female roles is rooted in an experience of growing contestation and reflexivity. It is embedded in a process involving a deconstruction of gender differences and traditional ways of thinking about gender roles. Manuel, an internet manager in a private company, is one of the more reflexive fathers. He describes how being alone on leave made him think about the construction of gender equality (which he already valued) as an on-going step by step process:

I think equality (...) is not just household chores, it's not just your worries, not just the shared leave ... With all due respect, and I think the new shared leave is very important... I think it's the other side, really understanding the man (...) That other side is more of an effort, isn't it? It's more of an effort. Making meals, being at home all day, that's an effort, so it's good to share that aspect, let's share that side. The other thing is – I can sleep with

him here close beside me, feel his warmth, even though I (the man) have to wake up and go and fetch him, then it's "look, go and fetch him", "right, I'll stick with the worst part which is going to get him, and you get the best part, which is staying with him. Why don't we share it the other way round? You go there, make up the bottle, you go and fetch him and I'll give it to him in bed". That doesn't happen, but I think that's the next step, that may be the next step ...

The effects of leave use on fathers' changing perceptions of gender roles may also be captured in their reflections on motherhood. The experience of solo caring leads to a questioning of mothering as an innate biological vocation and strengthens fathers' perceptions of primary caregiving as a skill which may be acquired through learning and agency. Even the fathers who are strongly supported and spend less time caring 'alone' feel that they have changed in this respect. Although they still consider the mother as the natural and competent caregiver, they were surprised to find out that a father can learn the basic skills of motherhood, not only to be able to replace her occasionally but also to be 'different' fathers.

4.6.6 *Experiencing Emotions*

The sixth key process which emerged was the experience of *emotions and feelings* related to caring and being alone at home with a small baby. Emotions are mostly positive, involving descriptions of pleasure, liking, happiness, satisfaction, willingness, ability, responsibility, confidence (in oneself and in the future of the child), connections, proximity, affection, awareness, friendship, challenges, testing oneself, pride, calm, empathy and mutual understanding. Negative emotions are mostly related to feelings of tiredness, panic, worrying (about getting everything done or problems at the workplace), rush and loss of time; but also, in some cases, to feelings of saturation, monotony and boredom. Positive emotions are connected not only to the overarching experience of leave but also to special moments which were part of the father's routine with the baby while on leave. Emilio, for example, recalls the proximity and pleasure he felt when he went shopping with the baby in a sling.

(...) she often went with me in the 'sling' (...) I feel this ritual of the sling was somehow more important than spending time with her at home when she was asleep in her cot for example. We would go to the market, we would walk there and then there was this feeling of physical closeness and proximity which made us both happy... (Emilio, 38, radio journalist, 1 child)

4.7 **Diversity of Experiences: Four Main Profiles**

Another key result is the diversity of lived experiences. The overarching themes and processes analysed above show that the lived experience of fathers is influenced by structural and interactional contexts, in particular by workplace culture and

partners' gender and professional roles, as well as shaped by the father's agency and reflexivity. By analyzing how the key processes are experienced and combined in different ways, we can use this sample to identify four main profiles of fathers' experience of being alone on leave.

Fathers who fall into the *supported* profile are those who see themselves as more traditional fathers who have always strived to 'help' their partner at home but are more comfortable when their caring role is supervised and mediated by the mother. During leave, these fathers who see themselves as 'helpers' are strongly supported both by their partner (who may come home early and even make an effort to rush home in the lunch hour) and by a third party (a mother, a mother-in-law, a domestic employee) who is usually present during part of the day and helps with caring and housework.

Actually, I spent a lot of time at my mother's house. I would take care of him in the morning, then take him to my mother's. We would have lunch there, spend the afternoon there, then my wife arrived, she always tried to arrive early (Paulo, 39, aircraft maintenance engineer, 2 children).

Those first days I was clumsy, but with lessons from my wife and help from my mother (...) I managed. Now I am more used to it (...), but even so I hope it won't be necessary again. What was really important to me was that I was able to help my wife keep her job. Of course I was lucky, because I could always turn to my mum for help... (José, 31, driver, 2 children)

The five fathers in this profile describe a greater sense of responsibility, feel that they have acquired more confidence but continue to see themselves as secondary caregivers, in contrast to the mother, who is perceived as the primary and natural carer. The new entitlement is seen as an opportunity, but the period of leave is appreciated mainly from the child's point of view, for strengthening family ties and because it contributes, overall, to the positive experience of paternity. The fact that the father is alone on leave is therefore less important. In fact, these fathers would have preferred to have more time on leave with the mothers. Talking about their experience, they blur the boundaries between being on paternity leave and being on parental leave. It is more the core components of the fathering experience, such as physical contact with the baby, spending time together, bonding and learning basic care skills such as feeding and putting to sleep, that are highlighted.

For men in the *fundamental break* profile, the period of leave alone is experienced as a key moment in family gender roles, as a fundamental break with previous highly differentiated gender roles. These are men who before going on leave alone were weak 'helper' partners in a context where female management of unpaid work was the rule. Considered as less professional or even inefficient by their partners, these men were called upon to help out but did little and were never allowed to be responsible for any particular task, even though some would have liked to take on more. The three men in this profile both took leave alone because their wives (judge, lawyer, bank department manager) felt it would be beneficial for professional reasons to go back to work earlier. In such a highly unequal gender context, fathers unexpectedly find themselves in a totally novel situation, having to cope with housework and full responsibility for a baby for the first time in a long

period of conjugal life. In some ways then, they experience the period of leave as offering a time of unusual responsibility and independence, which was appreciated. Moreover, unlike the men in the previous profile, they did not delegate the care of the child to third parties and underwent an important process of learning. The final result is double-pronged: the fathers continue to see themselves as ‘helper’ fathers and the mother as primary caregiver, but they feel that they have changed radically, in particular that they have become confident in the home and in the parental role.

I have a clear idea that I reminded myself to say “right, it’s time to feed, or give him the bottle, it’s time to go to sleep...” (...) I may even have done the same things before – [with his other children] –, but it was always with my wife to guide me. This last time I was home alone, so I acted more responsibly (...) but I also managed to get over that initial panic, of saying whenever he cried “he’s crying, what’s happening?” and I said to myself, right, “this must be the nappy or it must be time to give him the bottle”, so there was... a bit less panic, my reactions were a bit better organized and rational, let’s say, and practical maybe, yes, more practical ... (Roberto, 54, computer engineer, 3 children)

The third profile reveals fathers who before taking leave were already regularly involved in housework and childcare. Rather than ‘helpers’, they see themselves as ‘sharers’ of housework and ‘involved’ fathers. ‘Home alone’ leave is therefore tied more closely to core issues of autonomy and innovation. The period of leave brings little in the way of the new learning of basic tasks (“I already knew how to do that”, “I didn’t need a parachute”), but it is experienced as a final step towards becoming an independent caregiver to whom all tasks may be delegated as well as an opportunity to be creative, by building up an individualized profile of fathering. This may explain why the seven men in the *innovation and independence* profile experienced leave as a period of intense activity in which they engage in a large variety of tasks and become fully involved caregivers.

As a couple we are quite egalitarian. It was total sharing with the baby (...), I didn’t breast-feed that’s all. During that month everything went well, I already knew how to do everything, even if I was slightly unsure to begin with. In fact, I would have liked to stay longer, because it’s a phase in the child’s development in which interaction makes a difference, it increases and becomes more gratifying every day. Being on leave alone also makes for more complicity with the child, so it gives both parents a chance to develop their special place. In my view, it doesn’t take away anything from the mother but it adds to the father’s role (Raul, 37, TV journalist, 2 children).

The added value of ‘home alone’ caring is therefore more explicit than in the previous profiles: it is a step towards full individual autonomy as a carer but it also enhances the father’s specific profile as a highly involved parent and a competent promoter of work-family balance. Moreover, all these men see the strengthening of family bonds as a crucial factor. Strong father-child bonds are only possible, they say, when fathers spend a long time alone with the baby; in addition, this profile highlights the importance of creating empathy with the mother’s feeling of extreme tiredness when it is she alone who is caring and doing the housework. As a result, leave in all its forms is seen as positive, but the time the father spends alone is seen as being of special importance.

Fathers in the last *innovation and deconstruction* pattern closely follow the experiences described in the previous profile, but they are more reflexive with regard to the impact of leave on gender roles. The father values becoming a fully independent caregiver and house-person but he also regards the period of leave on his own as a fertile ground for building gender equality. In fact, part of the challenge was to demonstrate to themselves and others that they were capable of expertly combining all these aspects of a 'homeparent' rather than just caring for a baby during the day. From this perspective the father sees himself as an "egalitarian" partner who is "at the heart of the family" as his wife is. Moving beyond the activities involved in the efficient promotion of work-family balance, the five men in this profile also seek to "test themselves out" by embarking on tasks regarded as more difficult, such as having meals ready on schedule, having people in to eat, or planning a heavier task load. They also become more reflexive with regard to gender relations, questioning all differences between men and women which are held to be natural and reflecting on different strategies to build up gender equality in family life. This profile not only strengthens autonomy and bonds but also enables the period of leave to be viewed as a time when parents are able to deal explicitly with "in-built" cultural norms. An additional impact underlined by these fathers is the emergence of feelings of competition between fathering and mothering, with the need for some negotiation of when and how each parent spends time with the child and how caregiving is carried out.

I really had to "roll up my sleeves". I looked after the baby, but I also did all the housework and made a point of having supper ready on time. So the main advantage of this is that it puts men and women on a par, it's equates men's role to the role that was always the woman's. So it's a way of understanding the traditional tasks and worries that belonged to women, it's a new experience from this point of view, it really is! (Samuel, 29, nurse, 1 child).

I became more involved in all the daily decisions, for example, giving my opinion on what we should do with the baby. This produced another point of conflict between Sally and me, or rather, something which we have to keep discussing and work out. (Frederico, 35, designer, 1 child).

Several factors seem to encourage this profile in our study: first, these are men who were previously highly involved fathers within an egalitarian conjugal division of work, a context which encourages them to deconstruct and neutralize gender in family roles (e.g. all things may be done by him or her). Secondly, these are highly educated men who emphasize the value of work-family balance rather than just their work life and personal careers. Thirdly, these are pro-active fathers who make an extra effort while on leave, in order to make sure they know how to do everything and more; this ties in with an ideal norm of individualized parenthood, where it is important not only to take everything on, but also to do everything in one's own way. In this profile therefore, in contrast to the previous profiles, we cannot say that it is 'home alone' leave that actually generates the discourse of gender deconstruction. However, the findings demonstrate that the period of leave allows these men to put their changing conceptions to the test, particularly as far as the interchangeability of fathers and mothers is concerned.

4.8 Discussion and Conclusions

Our key aim in this chapter was to explore the lived experiences of fathers on leave alone in Portuguese society and to capture the social processes that structure their experiences. A second issue was to understand to what extent they confirm or challenge a dominant model of fatherhood and ‘masculine care’ underscoring more conventional gender roles and parental identities. Drawing on the results of our research, it is important to highlight three main conclusions.

A first conclusion is related to the fact that the interviewed fathers perceive and describe themselves as forerunner fathers who had to assert and negotiate their rights to share initial parental leave with the mother. In a context of recent policy changes, father’s leave in a ‘home alone’ manner is not taken for granted and calls for agency and assertiveness. Negotiation took place in both the private and public domains. At home parental negotiation was facilitated by a bonus scheme which, in case of gender sharing, allowed a) the mother to return to work earlier and b) the child to be cared for at home for an extra month, with full earnings compensation. Both these aspects, as well as a general trend valuing more involved fathering, facilitated the couple’s decision-making process. In contrast, negotiation of leave in the workplace, in particular in the private sector, was sometimes difficult. Ignorance of policy changes, difficulties in replacing fully-invested workers, and perceptions of father’s use of leave as a ‘choice’ were the main factors leading to disagreement, conflict and, in many cases, to the negotiation of a compromise (e.g. availability to work from home). In this context, it is not surprising that most fathers only used 1 month of initial parental leave.

A second conclusion is related to the social processes that structure the leave experience. From fathers’ descriptions of taking leave alone to care for a baby, we were able to identify six processes linked to this life experience and which allow us to conclude that fathers not only ‘negotiate’ leave and ‘do’ care but also ‘learn’, ‘bond’, ‘undo’ gender and experience new ‘emotions’. Analysis of these processes allows us to highlight some general trends.

Overall leave is highly valued because it contributes to child well-being, to the strengthening of father-child bonds and reduces the work penalty for full-time working mothers. However, it may also be seen to enable fathers to learn new instrumental and expressive parental skills, to foster male autonomy in care work, and to undo preconceived gender norms and practice. These three last foci of lived experiences seem to be strongly or even uniquely related to taking ‘home alone’ leave. It is in the context of a break with female mediation that the father’s self-definition as a capable, independent or even equal caregiver (on a par with mother) emerges with some strength and puts previous gender roles in question, in particular the idea that the mother is the primary and natural caregiver. On the other hand, it is also through being alone with a baby that fathers describe a process of integration of traditionally feminine psychological traits, such as emotional literacy. Interestingly, these *leave sharing couples* developed strategies allowing them to balance mother’s early return to work, father’s home alone leave and breastfeeding. In fact, breastfeeding was not seen as an obstacle for gender sharing of early leave: the mothers who were still

breastfeeding either left their milk or used the 2-h work-time reduction to come home in the lunch hour and/or finish work earlier. In summary, there is a common pattern in all interviewed men which is the fathers' immersion in *early childcare* in a *home alone manner*. The combination of these two aspects somehow represents an unique fathering experience since the care of a small baby, usually taken on by mothers and seen as more difficult, clearly promotes feelings of responsibility and parental skills. More importantly, perhaps, our findings point to social experiences not of 'slow time' and 'masculine care' but rather of 'fast time' and 'parental' care, meaning that the discovery of new skills, bonds and emotions promotes fathers' self-confidence in the equal and interchangeable competences of fathers and mothers when caring for a baby. The main issue here is that this type of leave seems to challenge, in varying degrees, the notion of parental care mediation as a female prerogative.

A third conclusion underlines diversity in fathers' understandings and experiences of leave and care. From this point of view, our qualitative study reveals a process of pluralisation rather than a linear move from a dominant model of masculine care towards a gender-equal and individualized parental care model. Drawing on the social processes that structure the leave experience, we identified four different profiles of fathers and their leave experiences (supported, fundamental break, innovative and independent, innovative and deconstructive). 'Supported' fathers are those that are closest to conventional masculine forms of care identified in some previous studies: they are less fully invested in leave alone (and usually have support from a third person), they perceive themselves as secondary caregivers who rely on female guidance, they do not do household tasks and, although they value the new parental skills acquired while on leave alone (allowing them to become different, more involved fathers), they do not aspire to autonomous and individualized fathering. In this profile the use of leave alone is often seen as instrumental (e.g. the mother was not eligible or must return to work) and more driven by the mother's motivations for gender sharing of leave than the father's. At the opposite end of the spectrum, in a profile associated with critical discourses and practices, 'innovative-deconstructive' fathers see themselves as autonomous and individualized carers. They openly question existing conceptions of gender roles and take advantage of the leave experience to reflect on possible strategies to strengthen gender equality and individualization in care. They also reflect on the impact of these changes on conjugal interactions: a model of individualized equal parenting makes for changing power relations and more conflict in parenting, thereby requiring new skills in order to negotiate and work out innovative care solutions within the couple.

To conclude, it is also important to understand the possible influence of national cultural and policy context on these findings, and of three factors in particular. First, in contrast with previous studies, the leave scheme in Portugal means that all fathers were caring for a baby rather than a toddler aged 1 or over. The care of a baby between 2 and 6 months old is likely to reinforce feelings of responsibility and capability. On the other hand, the high level of earnings replacement (100%, with no taxation) is an important push factor not only for leave sharing but also for the incorporation by fathers of the entitlement to leave on an individual basis.

Secondly, the influence of more traditional gender discourses and practices was not as overriding as might be expected. Given Portugal's track of gender inequality in unpaid work and strong family support, we expected to find a predominant pattern of fathers who delegated some of the care to other women while on leave, thereby making for a specific type of 'masculine care'. However, our results clearly point in a different direction: experiences are diverse, and the predominant profiles reveal fathers who take on new responsibilities. From a policy perspective, this means that even in a more laggard changing gender regime such as the Portuguese, recent developments in normative and policy context are promoting the acceptance of more involved fathering and enabling a substantial group of fathers to take up leave alone in diverse and innovative ways. In fact, policy changes seem to respond to fathers' new expectations of caregiving and 'different' fathering practices by providing them with a legal entitlement to do so. However, it is important to remember that our study is methodologically limited, in that it draws on a sample of twenty fathers, the majority of which are highly qualified and have permanent job contracts.

Thirdly, we cannot ignore the private-public dichotomy in Portuguese society. The existence of institutional resources (rights to leave) does not necessarily lead to the use of leave, in particular when policy changes are very recent; between stipulated rights and take-up there is a gap mediated by cultural, social and workplace factors. As a result, many fathers still have to negotiate leave with their employers in exchange for their commitment to work while on leave. In comparison with the "inevitability" of mothers' leave, fathers' leave is seen as an "option" which can imply considerable costs, particularly in the private sector. However, the organizational culture of the companies or departments where these men work and the interactional processes between workers and supervisors are often as important as the private-public dichotomy.

Findings from Portugal thus reflect a slow and complex process of change for fathers who take leave on a home alone basis. Fathers' discourses and experiences reveal the new centrality of fatherhood in the negotiation of old and new masculinities, with children and leave to care representing new and fundamental sources of identity. Nevertheless, the diversity of experiences also shows that the impact of leave is shaped by multiple factors, making for a complex process of pluralization rather than a clear-cut one-directional impact on fathers who use this type of leave. Our study therefore underlines the need to open up a new questioning: Does change and innovation in leave for fathers necessarily imply a move from 'masculine care' towards more symmetrical parenting roles or, rather, a shift towards a plurality of care models and experiences of leave?

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